

~The Painted Prince~

Once upon a stained glass dream, in the land of toys and games, there lived a Prince with a painted face. But be not mistaken, for as you will see in the following, not every truth is plainly written. It may very well shock you, but in fact, the face that the dear Prince wore was not one of his own choosing. Rather, it was one etched upon his pristine eisel skin by the wicked Puppet King himself. Every sullen morning, he made sure the Prince's face was brushed just as he liked it and every wretched evening, the Prince would try to wipe it off. His only ally in this dreadful back-and-forth was his sister made of charcoal, though she too had her own fair share of woes from the Puppet King. But even so, misery loves company, and no better company there can be than one's fellow cellmate.

The Painted Prince, as right as any individual in his situation may be, wished for freedom. Not just for himself, but for his dear sister as well. The face he was forced to wear ate away at his flesh, the many hues of the paint mixing with his own blood. And so, like any caged bird, the Painted Prince began to dream. He dreamt of what life would be like, free from the strings of the Puppet King; what life would be like for his dear sister; what life would be like with a face of his own choosing.

Now, while the Painted Prince lacked any interior freedoms, he was given short time to wander within the gardens. And it was in this time and space, that our hero met his truest ally, his most graceful confidante: the Flower. One fine evening, but not one so long ago, the young Prince spotted in the brush one lonely little Flower, tucked away where no one could see them. Finding kinship in the most unlikeliest of places, the two grew a bond, one as close and strong as two neighboring trees. The Painted Prince spoke to the Flower at many lengths, not just of his heavy burdens and sorrows, but of his hopes and dreams as well. And in kind, the Flower spoke of their many journeys as a mere seedling. They spoke of the mighty seas and bustling cities, the vibrant forests and towering mountains, places that the Painted Prince could never even fathom. But alas, the dear Painted Prince only had so much time he could spend in the little patch he called his haven, and every evening, bid the Flower a farewell just as sweet as they.

Evermore a tragedy, such a precarious balance could not hold long, for one horrid night, the Flower was startled with the sight of a weeping Prince. He felt heavy from the many burdens that dug into his form, the paint on his face feeling everso sharp. The Flower took their dear Prince into their arms and held him right. The Prince spoke of his woes, woes so wretched that they could not be transcribed with ink. But the Flower heard every word and could stand by no more.

"I tell you, my dear Prince, I offer you a remedy to all of your worries. I know of a place that holds all that could heal you, that could take away all that binds you and your family so."

Understand, dear reader, it was not out of a fear of the Puppet King, but a fear for his dear charcoal sister and all that could come after that he did not accept.

And thus, the Painted Prince declined. Two more nights followed, and in those visits, he denied the Flower twice more.

On the fourth night, however, the Prince took a long and heavy sigh, and accepted. The Flower took the young Prince by his hand and the two sunk deep into the ground. They flew between the stone and gravel, hopping through the tunnels that wound through the world below. It was only after passing through an ancient archway, one decorated with images of the stars and moons above, did the Painted Prince realize their destination. The duo had found themselves shrouded within the arms and shadows of ancient trees: a mighty forest.

The Flower brought the Painted Prince to a small grove, one held close to the forest's chest. Moss and ivy gripped the old trees, crumbling walls and columns were in the process of being swallowed by the land. At the center of this grove stood a mangled oak, though perhaps one younger than any of the other trees in the forest itself. As the duo stepped into the grove, there came no sounds from the forest beyond; no shouts from the wind, no greetings from the birds. Even the stones and leaves, crunched beneath the Prince's feet, seemed to bestow upon the land a sacred silence. The Prince approached the oak with hesitation.

The oak was, not to dare repetition, willowy, twisted in their age. There grew very few leaves upon their long branches, seemingly more for decoration than for their livelihood. Vines twisted all around their trunk, as long and as numerous as the oak's many years. But the most striking detail of this great tree were the little blossoms that were sprinkled about their branches, each of them a small jewel in the gloam of the night.

The Blooming Oak raised their head and looked upon the Painted Prince. Their face looked withered by time, but youthful all the same. Their sole eye, the verdant gem, looked upon the Painted Prince with an ancient curiosity. Their gaze felt hollow at first, but the Prince understood a comforting warmth hidden beneath the cold. Their voice followed, in both order and emotion.

"Dear prince, I see in you a great fear and a great burden, those shackled to your form by the very etchings that sit upon your brow. By the power of the forest, I offer to take away the face that burdens you so, and to leave a space behind for you to sketch upon to your heart's content. In return, I ask that I be given free reign to the abandoned mask, as I have my own activities to attend to."

The Painted Prince was startled by the Blooming Oak's offer, and took a step back, shaking. It felt as if the Blooming Oak was looming over him now, his painted form a mere pawn next to the towering rook. But the Painted Prince gave the offer a thought, and every moment spent knowing the origins of his face propelled him into action. The Flower beside him placed a hand on his shoulder, a silent support. The Painted Prince had made his choice— the first of many.

The Blooming Oak let out a resonant chuckle and raised their finger in practiced ceremony. They peeled at the pigments that clung to the Prince's face, ripping away the claws and talons

that dared to continue their perch. To the average passerby, the sight was one to behold. But to the boy, the boy with a face of his own, it was like that of a dream. He felt the waves crash into his form— not in malice, no, but something new. Like a gentle, yet determined hand washing his face and wiping away his tears.

When the Painted Prince opened his eyes, he was filled with such ecstasy and excitement. He looked for a puddle to see his reflection, but fell in both heart and stature when he saw what looked back.

"Why are there still paints? Was the enchantment not enough? Is this face carved too deep to remove?"

The Blooming Oak let out a sigh, but one carried in the arms of inspiration. The Flower only smiled at the Prince, their hand still planted firm in its position.

"The paints remain, yes, but that was never the point. I flicked away whatever lashes remained. It is now up to you to determine what lies there, even with the paints that were there before."

The Prince shook his head, the Blooming Oak's words falling out like blocks.

"I don't understand..."

"A scar's wounds may run deep, a pigment may stain too much. But even an artist knows how to turn a mistake into something beautiful. You are your own painter, my dear boy. And the pigments you wear are shaped by you. They are your joys, your laughter, yes. But they are also your sorrows, your pain, your fear."

The Blooming Oak wiped a tear from the Prince's face, and brushed it across his cheek. The tear, stained and smudged by the remnants of the paint, became a beautiful breath of sunset.

"And a true artist uses every color in their palette."

The young Prince stood up from the ground. His tears danced with the pigments that remained on his skin, not washing away the terrible colors, but instead, making room for more. And as the moment finally settled within the young Prince's heart, those tears of sadness and fear began to die down, a storm cloud of joy immediately thundering after. The tears dashed along the cheeks and cliffs of the Prince's face, turning his remarkable canvas into a cascading burst of color.

The Prince took the hand of the Flower and pressed it to his cheek, his face beaming like a daring sun. Perhaps there was truth in the Blooming Oak's words. Perhaps.

When he returned to the castle, he rushed to his sister, embracing her charcoal form wholeheartedly. And those too were mixed in with his colors. He gathered the flowers that

lingered in the gardens, thanking every one of them for the support they gave him in those many lonely nights. The Painted Prince looked about his palace for new paints to use, from the many servants and guards, from the many visitors and nobles that roamed about the castle's lands. He used every color he could find, lavishing his form with every scintillating shade and hue he could find. The brush was in his hand now, and he intended to decorate himself with all that remained around him (But to the matter of what the Puppet King's reaction to this uproar had been, no one could tell. For once the Painted Prince returned from the ancient wood, the cackling king had all but disappeared).

And at last, as our prismatic Prince gazed upon his new horizons, he offered the Flower a place to rest by his windowsill. No worldly pigment could ever leave such a vibrant shade on the Painted Prince, none as bright and beautiful as that of the colors that flushed his form whenever he saw the dear Flower. Every morning, he greeted the Flower with the same love and kindness they shared in the garden, and every evening since, they relished in the joys of not needing to say goodbye.

~And thus, we take a bow, and bid to you good night~